DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 441 345 FL 025 268

AUTHOR Gray, Jan; Hunter, Janet
TITLE Breaking the Cultural Cycle: Reframing Pedagogy and Literacy in a Community Context as Intervention Measures for Aboriginal Alienation.
PUB DATE 2000-04-00
NOTE 40p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Education Research Association (New Orleans, LA, April 24-28, 2000).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; *Attendance Patterns; Cultural Differences; *Culturally Relevant Education; English (Second Language); Foreign Countries; Health; *Indigenous Populations; Language Minorities; *Literacy; Multicultural Education; Parent Role; Second Language Instruction; Second Language Learning; *Teaching Methods; Uncommonly Taught Languages
IDENTIFIERS *Australia

ABSTRACT

This paper presents an alternative view to the pedagogical needs relating to literacy for Aboriginal students. The question posed is how to utilize this knowledge to lessen the impact of perceived failure in early schooling of entrenched non-attendance patterns for Aboriginal students of compulsory school attending ages. The potential for improving literacy levels within a school community sensitive to cultural and pedagogical diversity is presented as offering the parallel potential to encourage a more lateral view of non-attendance patterns. After laying out the constructions of Aboriginal alienation and literacy and the methodology used for this paper, the factors that affect the achievement and participation of Aboriginal students is examined in depth. Considered sequentially are parenting, health, attendance, literacy, and teacher factors. It is concluded that "reframing" the pedagogy of Aboriginal instruction is necessary for each of these factors. This paper proposes pragmatic beginnings to a more inclusive and culturally sensitive framing of policy and pedagogy associated with both non-attendance and literacy. These pragmatic beginnings are discussed in terms of both underlying beliefs necessary to activate pedagogical shifts of this magnitude and the potential impact on literacy outcomes of early implementation of these identified strategies. Numerous diagrams, tables, charts, and extensive scholarly references are included. (Contains approximately 100 references.) (Author/KFT)

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Breaking the cultural cycle: Reframing pedagogy and literacy in a community context as intervention measures for Aboriginal alienation.

Jan Gray
Edith Cowan University

Janet Hunter
Edith Cowan University

Jan Gray Janet Hunter

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AERA Conference on Research in Education
New Orleans
April 2000

Jan Gray
Faculty of Education
Edith Cowan University
Bradford St
Mt Lawley
Western Australia 6050

Jan.gray@cowan.edu.au
Fax 618 9299 7817
Ph 618 9370 6320

Janet Hunter
Faculty of Education
Edith Cowan University
Pearson St
Churchlands
Western Australia 6018

j.hunter@cowan.edu.au
Fax 618 9273 8714
Ph 618 9273 8420

FL 026 268

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Breaking the cultural cycle: Reframing pedagogy and literacy in a community context as intervention measures for Aboriginal alienation.

The cultural cycle: a global context

> If you don't go to school, you don't get the outcomes (Collins Report, 1999, p.141).
>
> Attendance is important – kids that come every day do advance with literacy and numeracy more than those that don't because they don't learn those things anywhere else(Collins report, 1999, p.142)

Compulsory education is an internationally accepted indicator of commitment to the rights of a child and the development of a country. In most Western societies, this commitment is linked to a legal framework in which non-compliance with such directives is defined as truancy and has become an internationally accepted part of the culture of schooling. By ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990, Australia's commitment to the education of the child (Article 28) has been extended to young people aged 0-18 years. Within this commitment, the legal definition of compulsory education in Australia refers to children aged between 6 and 15 years. However, within this very positive global picture there is a growing public concern for the apparently increasing number of students who are missing out on the educational opportunities supposedly available to all. This concern is particularly focused on students who do not complete Year 10 (the final stage of the compulsory education) and are thus seen to be at risk of long term educational, social and employment disadvantage.

A second, implicit, international commitment to the rights of a child is the American stance outlined in the International Reading Association's (2000) statement that every child has the right to appropriate early reading instruction sensitive to their individual and cultural needs. The statement focuses on the powerful risk factors of poverty, diversity, family structures and skilled teachers, pointing out that knowing and understanding children's backgrounds is a critical feature of good teaching. Diversity within the children's backgrounds creates challenges for the teacher, with the more diverse backgrounds presenting the tougher challenges. Some of these challenges are associated with a diversity of attendance patterns in children from 'different' family structures and cultural groups. The diversity of Aboriginal children's non-attendance patterns is most commonly defined in Western schools as a form of truancy and the first point of alienation from educational opportunities.

This paper presents an alternative view to the pedagogical needs relating to literacy for Aboriginal students. The question posed is how to utilise this knowledge to lessen the impact of perceived 'failure' in early schooling of entrenched non-attendance patterns for compulsory aged Aboriginal students. The potential for improving literacy levels within a school community sensitive to cultural and pedagogical diversity is presented as offering the parallel potential to encourage a more lateral view of non-attendance patterns.

Constructions of Aboriginal alienation

The cultural gulf that separates schools and most indigenous students has been identified through research for at least a decade, as has the transition from educational marginalisation to social deviance (Beresford & Omaji, 1996). The strong link between disadvantage, alienation, resistance to education, suspensions and exclusions has long been presented as research 'knowledge', with local versions of this 'knowledge' dependent on the demographics of schools and their communities (Select Committee of Youth affairs, 1991; Fitzgibbon, 1996; Beresford & Omaji ,1996, 1998). A complex web of factors perpetuates this cycle of alienation for Aboriginal students, often linked to poor levels of literacy. Assessment frameworks developed within a cultural discourse of assumed deficit and an inappropriate time frame often cloud the potential achievement of many Aboriginal students. In Western Australia in 1998, statewide testing of 8-year-old children's literacy focused on the reading and writing of text (Education Department of Western Australia, 1998) revealed that only around one third of Aboriginal children met or exceeded the benchmarks for reading and writing. This confirms previously reported patterns of under achievement among Aboriginal children both in Western Australia (Ministry of Education, Western Australia, 1993) and throughout Australia generally (Masters & Forster, 1997).

Aboriginal students make up 5 per cent of the total Australian school population, but are reported to provide 30 per cent of the total number of truanting students in all Australian government schools. In her study of 30 000 compulsory aged students, Gray (2000) found 17.8 per cent of Aboriginal high school students were described as chronic truants (including 27 per cent of Year 10 Aboriginal students). 1995 Monitoring Standards in Education sampling data showed that literacy levels of Aboriginal students are approximately 20 per cent lower than the Western Australian state mean in Years 3, 7 and 10. [1]. Students' results in 1998 benchmark testing for Year 3 literacy standards in Western Australia showed 65 per cent of Aboriginal children performing below standard in reading, compared to 20 per cent of all Year 3 students. Given the potential clouding of Aboriginal student's literacy potential through inappropriate standards and testing, the literacy problem for Aboriginal students remains a priority for educational institutions.

The community notion of the deviant Aboriginal youth outlined by Beresford and Omaji (1998) complements the dominant notion of endemic Aboriginal truancy and academic problems. Howard Groome (1995, as cited in Beresford and Omaji, 1998) points to the complexity of reasons for the high drop out rate (including high truancy rates) of Aboriginal students, rarely related to intelligence or ability. He identifies issues related to poor teacher/student relationships (often including racism) and no sense of belonging in a classroom as crucial to an Aboriginal student's perceptions of failure. He suggests Aboriginal students feel achievement at school implies pressure to relinquish their cultural identity and peer acceptance.

Constructions of literacy

The concept of literacy has been described as "slippery" (Gallego & Hollingsworth, 1992; McGarry, cited by Hollindale, 1995). A term that was once unproblematically used to describe the interpretation of the alphabetic code has evolved

to have a much wider meaning. The term "literacy" has moved beyond the written text to include the negotiation of meaning through a variety of media in a variety of contexts. This shift in meaning has given rise to notions of "plural literacies" (Hollindale, 1995) "multiple literacies" (Gallego & Hollingsworth, 1992) and "multiliteracies" (New London Group, 1996).

These terms acknowledge the growing diversity of ways and purposes of communication in different social contexts in a rapidly changing world. It is recognised that very young children are exposed to greater or lesser degrees to a variety of literacies before they enter school (Heath, 1983; Taylor 1983), and that their competence with these different literacies contributes to a greater or lesser degree to the ways in which young children are able to take up the kinds of literacies which are offered to them through formal schooling (Hill, Comber, Louden, Rivalland & Reid, 1998).

Notwithstanding this view, official policies tend to take a more functional view of literacy. The Australian Language and Literacy Policy (DEET, 1991, p.5) defines literacy as follows: "Effective literacy is intrinsically purposeful, flexible and dynamic and involves the integration of speaking, listening and critical thinking with reading and writing." This definition of (school) literacy is reflected in the reading, writing, speaking, listening and viewing strands that make up the English curriculum profile for Australian schools (Australian Education Council, 1994). In Western Australia, state-wide testing of 8-year-old children's literacy in 1998 and 1999 has focused on the reading and writing of texts.

The *Statement on English for Australian Schools* (Australian Education Council, 1994b, p. 4) states that:

> while respecting students' home languages,...teachers have a responsibility to teach the forms and usages generally accepted in Australian English, [which]... should be treated as an extension of, and an addition to, a student's home language. The goal should be to ensure that students develop an ever-widening language repertoire for personal and public use.

The main aim of the literacy curriculum in the education system then, is to provide children with the literacy skills they will need to be able to operate fully in the wider Australian society. Nakata (1995, p. 18) confirms the desirability of this approach for Indigenous people:

> Contrary to the anxiety of those who see the call for English literacy and Western knowledges as ignoring the values of cultural distinctiveness, there are [Torres Strait] Islanders who see English literacy as a crucial element to upholding Islander customs and traditions – how else are we to guard against the insidious effects of Western culture? It is crucial for a political approach to self-determination and autonomy; crucial for employment and life chances; for status; for information; and indeed crucial for the same range of reasons as any other Australians and more.

Methodology

Over-all context of the studies

This paper presents a marrying of two independent studies conducted within Western Australia, representing potential for early literacy intervention strategies to decrease the rejection of schooling by young, often transient, Aboriginal students. The first project illustrates the non-attendance patterns of compulsory school aged students (both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) perpetuated through public policy as part of a cultural framing of social exclusion practices. The second project presents preliminary findings from a longitudinal study of the literacy development of Aboriginal children in their first years of formal education. The truancy/social exclusion aspects of the second study are presented as the consequences for not adequately addressing in a contextual sense the pedagogical needs of beginning Aboriginal learners.

Early development of literacy can be viewed from a number of perspectives. The view of emergent literacy (eg Clay, 1979;1993a; Goodman, 1986; Strickland & Morrow 1989) focuses on children's ever-growing knowledge about the technology and processes of written language. Cognitive skills and understandings do not develop in isolation, however, but are influenced by the social context and processes through which development takes place (Bissex, 1980; Heath, 1983; Taylor, 1983). These contexts and processes are in turn influenced by social, cultural and institutional practices which surround literacy learning and form part of the context (Baker & Davies, 1993; Baker & Freebody, 1998; Freebody & Luke, 1991).

Study of Non-attendance

The study of non-attendance policies as a form of social exclusion particularly impacting upon Aboriginal students involved collection of absentee data across four urban educational districts, as illustrated below in Table 1.

Table 1.
Compulsory Aged Population in Education Districts Participating in the Study

Education District	Non-Aboriginal Compulsory aged Population	Aboriginal Compulsory aged Population	Total Compulsory aged Population
No. 1	29, 473	1,259 (4.1%)[a]	30, 732
No. 2	16,356	205 (1.2 %)	16,561
No. 3	24,021	247 (1.0%)	24,268
No. 4	7,829	512 (6.1%)	8,341
Total	77,679	2,223 (2.8%)	79,902

[a] Per cent of total compulsory aged population

Both qualitative and quantitative data related to factors related to school non-attendance were collected in each district over a period of eighteen months.

Qualitative data: Qualitative data collection for this study involved extensive interviewing of all stakeholders in compulsory education, observations of practice of School Welfare Officers, Juvenile Justice mentors, community police, administrators and policy makers. This provided an opportunity for participation in the whole gamut of public policy enactment within one of the education districts. Interviews were conducted with Aboriginal educational administrators, parents, students and Juvenile Justice mentors, confirming the alienation factors highlighted by non-attendance profiles. Literacy problems were consistently identified as a major factor influencing rejection of traditional schooling and almost negligible employment prospects. Addressing the literacy problem was presented by all stakeholders as a priority in reducing the marginalisation of this minority group of students, whose first access to an individualised learning program was often during their detention for criminal activity.

Quantitative data: Access to education district databases provided the major focus of the quantitative data collection. A more detailed study was conducted in Education District No.1, involving 30 000 students. Any subsequent patterns and themes associated with school rejection were then confirmed across the remaining three districts. For eighteen months, data were collected for the district database reflecting gender and ethnicity patterns of students referred as 'chronic' truants to the School Welfare Officers and students who were either suspended or excluded from school. This enabled patterns reflecting non-attendance (usually defined as truancy) and school suspension of both primary and high school Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students.

Study of Early Literacy Development

Both qualitative and quantitative methods have been used to collect data relating to young indigenous children's literacy development. Data were collected from six rural schools in Western Australia, which comprised three district high schools (K-10) and three primary schools (K-7) in two Education Districts. The schools were representative of a range of different contexts and locations. School 2, which is situated in a small mining town with a population of 731, had 69 student enrolments and four teaching staff. School 6, which had been established for only four years in a large regional centre with a population of nearly 30,000, had over 450 student enrolments and 25 teaching staff. Approximately three per cent of children in School 6 were Aboriginal, compared to approximately 98 per cent in School 5. In the other schools, between 40 per cent and 60 per cent of the students were Aboriginal.

Qualitative data:

The notion of educational criticism and connoisseurship (Eisner, 1985) has been used to describe, interpret and evaluate literacy teaching practices as they play out in individual case studies selected from these six diverse schools. Qualitative data were collected through participant observation in pre-primary (5-year-old), year one (6-year-old) and year two 9 (7-year-old) classrooms. Informal and extended interviews were conducted with teachers, Aboriginal Education Workers, Teacher Aides, Principals and their deputies. Data were also collected through informal interactions with children, their parents and siblings; and by collecting various leaflets, pamphlets and newsletters through which schools communicate with parents and members of the wider community.

Quantitative data:

In term four, 1998, a series of diagnostic literacy assessment tasks was carried out with children in pre-primary and year one classes in the six participating schools. A total of 123 children, comprising 62 pre-primary and 61 year one children completed the full range of assessment tasks. Of these children, 62 were Aboriginal and one was a Torres Strait Islander. The remainder of the children were of predominantly Anglo/European descent. The assessment tasks were completed individually, with the researcher, in a familiar setting, usually the child's classroom. Each set of assessment tasks took approximately 30 minutes to complete. In the case of younger children, or children who quickly lost interest, the tasks were completed in two or three sessions of 10-15 minutes.

The tasks provided quantitative data relating to the children's skills and understandings of the technology of print. These tasks included an Environmental Print Test (Hill et al, 1998), Concepts about Print (Clay, 1993a), Letter Identification (Clay, 1993a), analysis of writing samples (Clay, 1993a), book reading behaviours on text gradients (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996), sight word recognition from a high frequency word list (UK National Literacy Strategy, 1998) and a test of phonological awareness adapted from Munro (1998). Analysis of these data provided an indication of Aboriginal children's expected progress during their first year of formal schooling, and a baseline measure for comparison using the same assessment tasks in 1999 and 2000. In addition, attendance data were collected for the 123 5 and 6-year-old children during the period of the study, using the class attendance registers. These data were recorded in terms of the numbers of half days present, absent, or off the roll.

Factors which impact upon the achievement and participation of Aboriginal students

This section of the paper addresses issues related the impact of current pedagogy and policy associated with non-attendance and literacy which manifests as a continuation of the cultural cycle of social exclusion of Aboriginal students. These issues are discussed in terms of a series of inter-connected factors which compound existing cultural misconceptions and justify existing pedagogy and policy.

The Parenting factor

Within the cultural fabric of those students vulnerable to alienation from schooling lies the parenting factor. A child attempting to maintain regular and meaningful connection within mainstream schooling options is extraordinarily disadvantaged if living within a dysfunctional home. There is, however, a danger in reading "dysfunctional family" as "unconventional family". Non-conventional lifestyles with a high commitment to lifestyle values (including education) appear to offer a child long-term protection from school failure (Garnier et al., 1997).

Qualitative data in the non-attendance study indicated households to be judged as dysfunctional within a conventional non-Aboriginal middle class belief system defining

dysfunctional as different. Teaching staff, administrators and student services staff made subjective links between the educational potential of students and their supposedly dirty homes. Staff complained about the inconvenience of an illiterate household with no phone. Assumptions were made by institutional representatives supposedly acting as advocates for disaffected youth about the extended family concept, the welfare mentality, the involvement with crime. Little evidence was found of an appreciation of the causes, incidence and effects of poverty, particularly in relation to indigenous families and their various lifestyles. Any construction of the interaction between 'family' and 'crime' is confounded by the complex inter-relationships within a family culture, as with the flexibility of the notion of 'family'. Bessant, Hil, Watts and Webber (1999) describe the rigid community view of family as a means of silencing the voices of a social institution defined as "different".

> The possibility of alternative family forms and the influence of gender, class and ethnicity on family relationships are rarely explored in detail. The sole parent household is regarded as deviant to the culturally-loaded norm of the 'complete' or 'intact' nuclear family....Rarely does one get the sense that families are complex, interactive institutions in which power and interest play a significant role in determining relationships therein. (Bessant et al., 1999, p.23)

Framing non-attendance as an indicator of inadequate parental control has influenced creation of public policy at school, community and State levels aimed at addressing the need to provide parent training. Such a public course of action is fraught with potential cultural misconceptions which can only compound existing cultural barriers, as Lisa Delpit (1995) warns:

> Many school systems have attempted to institute "parent training" programs for poor parents and parents of color. While the intentions of these programs are good, they can only be truly useful when educators understand the realities with which such parents must contend and why they do what they do. Often, middle-class school professionals are appalled by what they see of poor parents, and most do not have the training or the ability to see past the surface behaviours to the meanings behind parents' actions (Delpit, 1995, p.175).

Common sense (as well as research) tells us the culture of a household, indigenous or otherwise, becomes a determining factor for the development of self-confidence and the continuing education of a child. Generational patterns of school alienation (and thus truancy) develop within such a cultural context. The danger of narrow, ethnocentric assumptions driving any institutional definition of dysfunctional families was emphasised in the 1997 'Bring Them home' report. The observation was made that cultural values often lead not only to unnecessary interventions but also to inappropriate reactions to indigenous children through misinterpretation of their home situation. The following recurring themes of (mis)interpretation were identified:

- The implicit or explicit interpretation of extended familial responsibility as 'abandonment' or 'inadequate supervision'.
- The implicit or explicit interpretation of travel to maintain familial and cultural relationships as 'instability'.
- Differences in the level of freedom and responsibility accorded to indigenous children interpreted as 'lack of supervision' or 'lack of control' over children
- The cultural biases which become incorporated in assessments and reports may be used to justify more interventionist decisions by child welfare and juvenile justice [and education] agencies as well as decisions in relation to matters such as child removal [suspension and exclusion from schools] adoption and custody ('Bring Them Home' report, 1997, p.546).

Although directly related to indigenous cultural factors, many of these observations could be attributed to a broader definition of deprivation: cultures of poverty, dependency and long-term unemployment. Being a student who is different matters in decision making processes in most school settings. Being culturally different matters even more so.

The devastating inter-generational effect on the perceived parenting skills of indigenous adults who had been separated from their families through assimilation policies (the 'Stolen Generation') is well documented. For many indigenous parents of the current generation of school aged children, there had been no models of culturally appropriate parenting, leading to an increased risk of a second generation of institutionalised youth, either through intervention from Family and Children's Services or through interaction with the legal system. The high proportion of the "stolen generations" with problem children of their own reported within the 1997 'Bringing Them Home' report [2]manifests within any informed scrutiny of truancy, suspension and exclusion data for compulsory aged students.

Lifestyle and cultural differences impacted on young Aboriginal children's early literacy development in a number of ways. Parents who had poor literacy skills, or who were not well-versed in school-like literacy practices were generally perceived by teachers as being unsupportive of their children's efforts to learn literacy:

> I've actually got one kid and I said to him, well if I give you home reading, are you going to read it? And he said no and I said well I'm not wasting my time giving you one then....His mother can't read, so it's not encouraged, so I thought, well, you know, you're fighting a losing battle, what's the point of him taking a book home if no one can read with him? (Year two/three teacher).

Instead of seeing this situation as a professional challenge, and looking for ways to address the child's literacy needs in school, this teacher located the problem with the child or with the child's family. The teacher made the assumption that because the child's parent was unable to read herself, she was not supportive in her son's efforts to read. There is substantial evidence however, that Aboriginal people very strongly support the notion of their children becoming literate in Standard English (Collins Report,

1999, Nakata, 1995; Western Australia, 1994). This evidence was further supported by another parent, who explained that her own mother had been one of the "Stolen Generation" and described the impact that her mother's inability to read or write had had on her family:

> With reading, my mum can't read or write. ...I have [made it a focus]. Especially with myself and my brothers growing up through school. My father used to make sure we had an hour of reading a day. I enjoyed it but I hated doing it constantly every day. We then had to read to my father until we got it right. If we read it wrong we had to keep on going until it was right. This has made me more determined to make my own kids read. To reach the level the Education Department expects. I try to make reading fun for my kids.

As a consequence of the perceived lack of support for literacy education from parents and other family members, teachers lowered their expectations accordingly and demanded less of the Aboriginal children. Some teachers felt that what they saw as the children's poor levels of achievement was located specifically with the Aboriginal children; "...some of them have no idea. I find it's the, like, I find it's the white children that can write." (Pre-primary teacher). Other teachers felt that the low levels of achievement crossed both cultural groups:

> I was absolutely horrified when I took the fives over, as to how far behind the kids were. That's both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children. You can tell the kids that have come from Perth. Because they're so much better and further ahead. (Year two/three teacher).

One teacher had been shocked at the way in which older children in the school presented their work. As a result, she had made colouring in a priority in her pre-school curriculum:

> "I've noticed with a lot of the school they can't write. They can't colour in properly. This class are very good at colouring in now. Because I, I did it like, they had one activity every day, where they would colour in something, because, just looking at the rest of the school I don't think, I don't want this class to end up like that. It sounds horrible, but by year five or six, I think you should be able to colour in without scribbling." (Pre-primary teacher)

Although she commented at the same time that the children's writing skills were poor, this teacher had opted to address the problem of presentation of work rather than scaffold her students' interactions with print. Many other teachers took a similar course of action with their students, resorting to simple and repetitive worksheets and colouring-in activities, which ultimately resulted in a "dumbing down" of the curriculum that was offered to Aboriginal children.

The health factor

A number of health issues have been identified as having an impact on the general educational outcomes for Aboriginal children, including "nutritional deficits, hearing impairment, poor eyesight, anaemia and skin diseases" (Collins Report, 1999). A particular

difficulty which affects Aboriginal children learning Standard English literacy is that of otitis media, a chronic middle ear disease. Between 25-50per cent Aboriginal children are affected by mild to moderate hearing loss through otitis media (Quinn; Kelly & Weeks cited by Howard, 1994). While this hearing loss can be spasmodic, especially in younger children, continued recurrences can result in permanent damage to the ear drum or auditory canal, with the result of permanent hearing loss (Howard, 1994). Collins (1999) reports the example of a year four class in a bush school where ear examinations demonstrated that over 90per cent of the students were found to have no eardrums at all.

The presence of drugs in any youth culture associated with school or recreation is no longer merely a question. Adolescent perceptions of risk behaviour at school reported by Zubrick et al. (1997) indicated 17 per cent of students involved in drug usage and 13 per cent involved alcohol consumption before and after school. The current dilemma surrounding heroin trials in Australia could be seen as an indication of the level of community concern and resistance to legally reconstructing the drug problem as a health problem[3].

The prevalence of substance abuse by school aged children is well recognised in research and community knowledge[4]. In the experience of younger participants in the non-attendance study (particularly Aboriginal students), drugs and violence are now simply part of the school culture. This phenomenon was not necessarily acknowledged by school staff and certainly not accepted as a school cultural phenomenon to be addressed in other than a punitive manner by implementation of regulatory means of excluding the problem. Most students with drug problems become candidates for suspensions and school exclusion.

Substance abuse is a major feature of the subculture of urban Aboriginal youth, both manifesting and perpetuating their marginalised lifestyle (Beresford & Omaji, 1996, 1998). Subsequent dependency on an increasing range of both legal and illegal substances often provides the trigger for Aboriginal youth to become alienated from school and involved in crime. Most adolescent Aboriginal young people involved in substance abuse come from the poorest socioeconomic groups; more specifically from dysfunctional families where domestic violence and alcoholism are common.

The problem of substance abuse amongst Aboriginal children is not restricted to adolescents. Glue-sniffing is becoming increasingly prevalent amongst Aboriginal primary school students, who are equally likely to engage on a daily basis once engaged in the habit[5]. The resultant high is almost immediate, but short lived. The excitement and euphoria experienced is enhanced by the group nature of the activity (often a sibling group activity), giving a socialisation focus to the abuse which over-rides any notions of regular school attendance. Older Aboriginal adolescents are reported to prefer more expensive, more addictive drugs, also more inclined to provide the confidence for criminal activity to feed their addiction[6].

Several Aboriginal Education Officers pointed out issues of drugs and Aboriginal non-attendance, more from personal experience within their Aboriginal community than

from educational administrative position. They saw the effects of unemployment, welfare and subsequent drug dependency on young Aboriginal people and their education. As with Donnison (1998, p.10), the views expressed are a reminder that "we all live in a grey world of uncertain virtue", where secure jobs are "a basic requirement for self respect and crime prevention". This perspective was clearly outlined by one of the Aboriginal Education Officers:

> I think the Aboriginal non-attendance problem will continue to grow. The reason why kids truant is shifting in the last 10 years. Now, it's a drug problem. The drug issue is bigger than people realise. Substance abuse of some sort. Prior to that it was just alcohol, but now drugs are rife in a lot of families. For the majority it's just dope, but for a lot it's gone much further. The kids are starting at 15, or younger. And their role models are their parents, sisters and brothers. Now what chance have they, but to follow? It's not just drugs. It's the situation in the homes. And with unemployment, there's not a lot else to do. And let's not pretend it's all bad, because the life style is great! Especially for adults.

> High school kids enrolled at a school are entitled to Abstudy payments, so in my experience most of them remain enrolled until they have no choice. But that doesn't mean they are enrolled locally. They could be enrolled anywhere in the state. And it certainly doesn't mean they attend school. There are so many drugs around, and drugs are easy to access these days. Well, nothing's cheap when you're on welfare....But that's where the crime comes in, see. The dole money disappears pretty quickly in these households, but the kids still want drugs, so they go and steal or whatever to get the money. Lots of them have pretty shitty lives, you know, and compared to drugs, school is the last thing on their minds. Some of the older kids try training programs and so on, but by then this other culture has taken over and the kids just don't want to go to any form of schooling. So they just drop out altogether.

The comments expressed by this participant echo France and Wiles' (1998) reminder that when caught in the poverty loop, limited educational and unemployment prospects usually follow, continually creating a culture of exclusion which from within appears to offer little chance of escape.

The attendance factor

As highlighted in the Collins Report (1999), the relationship between regular school attendance and the continued development of literacy levels has been well established. The complexity of this relationship was evidenced in interview data from both the non-attendance study and the literacy study reflecting Aboriginal students' (and their teachers') perceptions of their 'being dumb' because of an inability to demonstrate expected literacy levels within the classroom. For many of the students in the non-attendance study, this became the trigger for inappropriate classroom behaviour leading to enforced school non-attendance as a form of punishment, or development of patterns of chronic non-attendance (truancy).

An examination of the extent to which Aboriginal students are rejecting regular school attendance can be seen in the following illustration of student non-attendance within an education district. An education district consists of a mix of both primary and high schools. The district chosen to illustrate patterns of non-attendance included 75 government primary schools, with a total primary school population of 22,430 students, including 1259 Aboriginal students. The district also included 13 senior high schools and one district high school, giving a total of 8302 students in Years 8, 9 and 10 (compulsory school age) in the district, of whom 394 are Aboriginal students. The diversity of school populations, staffing profiles and locations within the district makes any generalisation between schools almost impossible, given the nature of the data referred and collated. However, certain characteristics are evident within the district. Many families in the district are of lower socio-economic background. 5.4 per cent of the student population are Aboriginal students, most of whom attend a small range of schools within the district. Some areas within the district are reported to reflect a relatively high (within the state) juvenile crime rate (ABS, 1996).

Patterns of chronic absenteeism evidenced in the data collected within this district were particularly evident for Aboriginal boys in Years 1 and 2, and for all students in Years 9 and 10 (the last two years of compulsory education). Examining the data in this form illustrates the increasing number of students defined as at risk during their high school years. Data from the non-attendance study indicate that any reading of non-attendance data at district level at all levels within the community apart from Aboriginal administrators was generally in terms of the number of students referred in each year group, translated to a proportional reading of the total student population. Although an indication of the extent of the non-attendance patterns of Aboriginal students is given within such a reading, it is only when the data are considered in terms of proportion that differences in attendance patterns become obvious, as illustrated in Figure 5 below.

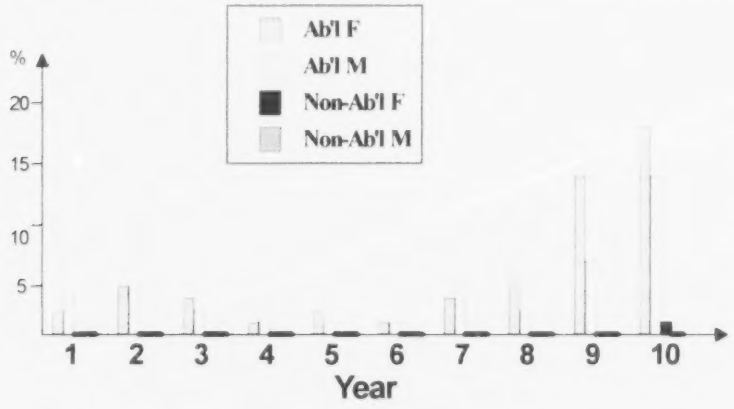

Figure 1: Unexplained absences in Education District No.1 in a five-week period during 1999

The stark difference between non-attendance patterns for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students at all levels of their compulsory education can be seen. Of great concern are the number of very young Aboriginal students with unexplained absences for more than ten days in the first five-weeks of their school career, limiting their opportunities to cope with traditional age-related educational expectations. In response to my queries about this phenomenon, the Aboriginal Education Officer and the School Welfare Officer told me of their efforts to work with the parents to reduce the number of young Aboriginal students in the area who had not been enrolled for the first year of school. The greater proportion of Aboriginal students with unexplained absences can be followed through each year of primary education, culminating in the final year of primary school (Year 7) with a reflection of the increased absenteeism of Aboriginal students during high school years.

One of the key issues arising from the qualitative data of adolescent Aboriginal boys alienated from school in the non-attendance study was the level of embarrassment at their lack of literacy skills. Frequent comments focused on the boys' perceptions that they "weren't any good at school", or "the teacher thought I was dumb". One Year 9 Aboriginal boy trying to meet the requirements of being re-integrated into school refused all forms of schooling proffered to him, as he didn't like "the testing". Every attempt he made to attend a new school setting (including detention) triggered the same batch of diagnostic testing. He didn't need testing to tell him he could only read at Year 2 level, nor did he need the constant humiliation. He needed some form of inter-school (or inter-agency) transfer of the diagnostic test results. From observations and interactions in practical situations, the boys were very proud of their manual and sporting skills. The difficulties faced by these semi-literate boys in a work place requiring the ability to read instructions was overcome by their ability to work on a visual and conceptual basis involving modeling processes starting from a concrete example.

Most students wanted to be re-engaged within a structured learning environment or work skills environment, as long as their inability to read was not a shame feature. Several students talked of a classroom being "like a factory, Miss. I can't sit there all day. All in rows." There was a very strong sense of loyalty, particularly in the broader definition of family. The sense of family was also indicated through conversations surrounding looking out for siblings (especially younger siblings) and 'family responsibility'. This loyalty was the most common provocation for fighting other students. The racial slur was reported as common amongst both student body and some staff, and was loudly given as justification for retaliation. School retaliation was suspension, often back-to-back..

Low rates of participation in formal education for primary aged Aboriginal children have been consistently documented (Australia, 1995; Louden, 1997; Collins Report, 1999; Groome & Hamilton, 1995; Western Australia, 1994). Previous studies have identified a number of reasons for Aboriginal children's low levels of attendance at school. These reasons include family obligations such as looking after younger children (Groome & Hamilton, 1995; Peacock, 1993), frequent sickness (Groome & Hamilton, 1995) and cultural obligations such as attendance at funerals and other community events

(Peacock, 1993). For example, one of the children in the literacy study was absent from her regular school for extended periods on two occasions. The first of these was a period of approximately six weeks when her mother went to Perth for the birth of a child. During this time, various relatives in other communities cared for the six children in the family. Later in the year, the child's mother was again hospitalised, this time for a period of approximately six months. Again the children were cared for by relatives in another community, although this time the (now) seven children were kept together. During these absences from their home community, the children of this family attended school in their "host" communities.

Irregular attendance of some children was a major issue of concern for all teachers at all rural schools. Absenteeism appeared to fall into two categories: absenteeism due to transience, when the family were away from the community for a time, and non-attendance even though the family were still in the town. Most rural schools had a policy of removing children from the roll after they had been consistently absent for a specified period of time, usually two or three weeks. However, these children would almost invariably return to the school: "they might go for six months and then they come back; they might go for a year and then they come back" (Year 2/3 teacher). Although there seemed to be a core group of children at each school who attended reasonably regularly throughout the year, there would be others who were there one term and gone the next, to be replaced by a different group of children who had previously been elsewhere.

This transience presented a number of difficulties, which impacted on the continuity of young children's education. It was often difficult to establish if and where children had attended school when they had been away from the town or community, and this posed a difficulty in obtaining students' academic records. By the time this information was tracked down by the school, or by the time teachers had worked out what stage of development the children were at in order to plan for effective teaching, a considerable amount of time had been lost. Sometimes, in the absence of "official" information, assumptions were made which were not always correct. For example, one student from the literacy study was tracked as she moved from one school to another. She was placed in the year one class at the new school, when she had been in the year two class in her home community, and which was the correct class for her chronological age.

Students at educational risk

Attendance data were collected for the 163 Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children who participated in the literacy study during 1998, by noting the number of half days each child was absent during each term. Table 2 summarises this data, by term and by cultural group, displaying the mean number of half days of absence, and the maximum number for any child for that term. The minimum number was 0, for all terms, and for both cultural groups.

Table 2.
Number of Half Days Absent During 1998, by Term and by Cultural Group.

	Term 1		Term 2		Term 3		Term 4	
	Mean	Max	Mean	Max	Mean	Max	Mean	Max
Aboriginal children	16	58	20	88	18	60	20	74
Non-Aboriginal children	5	20	5	42	6	24	5	24

In their study of 2,737 school age children in Western Australia, Zubrick et. al. (1997, p. 27) suggest that students with nine or more days (18 half-days or 20per cent of the school term) unexplained absence from school would be at "educational risk"; that is, they were more likely (3:1) to be performing at below age level in academic performance than those who had lower levels of absence. If a figure of 18 half-days is taken to be a benchmark for identifying students who are potentially at risk due to absence from school, it can be seen from Table 1 that the average Aboriginal child and some non-Aboriginal children could be considered to be in this category.

Similar patterns of Aboriginal students placed at educational risk through absence from school were found in the non-attendance study. Table 3 indicates the significant proportion of compulsory-aged Aboriginal high school students within a school district who were referred to the School Welfare Officer during 1998 as having missed at least 20 days of schooling and thus defined as a 'chronic' truant. The disproportionate number of Aboriginal students so defined is starkly evident given the proportion of the total number of referrals of high school students in the same cohort during 1998 was only 3.6 per cent (5.1 per cent of whom were year 10 students). These patterns were also evident in data for primary school students in the district, where 6.5 per cent of the 1259 primary school aged Aboriginal students in the district were referred to School Welfare officers as chronic truants. The increasing incidence of chronic non-attendance from Year 1 through to Year 10 illustrates the impact of the alienation

Table 3:
Referrals of Aboriginal Chronic Truants from High Schools in Education District No. 1, 1998.

Year	Aboriginal male	Aboriginal female	Total	Proportion of year group (per cent)
8 (n=164)	9	7	16	9.8
9 (n=108)	10	11	21	19.4
10 (n=122)	28	5	33	27.0
Total (n=394)	47	23	70	17.8

A complementary pattern is seen in the proportion of Aboriginal high school students who were suspended from school as a form of punishment for anti-social behaviour for a total of at least ten days during 1998 (Table 3).

Table 4:
Suspension Data for Compulsory Aged Government High School Students in Education District No.1 During 1998

	No. students suspended	Proportion of student group (per cent)
Non-Aboriginal high school students (n=7908)	1178	14.9
Aboriginal high school students (n=394)	66	16.75
Total (n=8302)	1244	14.98

Poor attendance has a compounding effect on student performance and levels of teacher frustration in maintaining any consistent scaffolding literacy strategies. Irregular attendance impacts on both the regular attendees and the poor attendees, particularly in rigid forms of pedagogy and punishment for 'truancy'. This compounding effect is even more evident in metropolitan high schools , where flexible notions of attendance and personalised teaching modes are considered almost impossible to implement. The alienation from the school environment and from school curricula could be traced through the data of both studies to show an seemingly inevitable path to reduced literacy outcomes for Aboriginal students.

The literacy factor

Aboriginal children face particular problems learning literacy because the majority of them, in both urban and rural communities, speak a variety of Aboriginal English as their first dialect (Eades, 1993). Aboriginal English differs from Standard Australian English at every linguistic level (Eades, 1993; Malcolm, 1995), including accent, grammar, vocabulary and pragmatic use. Teachers who are unaware of the differences between Aboriginal English and Standard English may fail to see Aboriginal English as a legitimate dialect and simply dismiss it as "bad English", in need of correction (Eades, 1993).

Several teachers were surprised to learn that Aboriginal English is considered to be a language in its own right. One year 2/3 teacher had structured a literacy lesson around the use of tense. Although she appeared to be aware that the Aboriginal children used tense in a different way to the non-Aboriginal children, she seemed to be unaware of the reasons for this difference, and therefore made no attempt to acknowledge, or demonstrate to the children the differences between Aboriginal English and Standard English.

Analysis of the data collected from the assessment tasks in the literacy study confirmed the previously reported pattern of over-representation of Aboriginal children among the lower performing children (Ministry of Education, Western Australia, 1993; Masters & Forster, 1997). In particular, Aboriginal children beginning school had less knowledge about print than their non-Aboriginal peers did. Comparison of 5-year-old and 6-year-old Aboriginal children's literacy assessment data in 1998 suggests, however, that these children could be expected to make substantial progress during their first year of formal schooling, in all domains of school English literacy. It should be noted that in 1998 the 5-year-olds and 6-year-olds were different groups of children (pre-primary and year one), so the comparison showed progress that was *expected*, rather than *actual* progress. A full analysis of data from the assessment tasks conducted in 1999, and which will measure actual progress within groups of children, has not yet been completed, but initial analysis suggests that the prediction of children's progress will be confirmed.

This data demonstrates that Aboriginal children make significant progress in their school-like literacy skills once they begin to be taught. Many children in the literacy study had irregular patterns of school attendance, were subjected to a number of teacher changes with the attendant changes in pedagogical style, and often, teaching which was not specifically directed at the needs of the Aboriginal children. How much more progress could these children have made had there been more continuity in the teaching they received, and if the instruction had been directed at the point of specific need for each individual child?

Literacy is a clearly identified factor within the academic construction of educational disadvantage and potential for limited participation in any compulsory or post-compulsory education opportunities. There is a strong link between disadvantage, alienation, resistance to education, suspensions and exclusions, exacerbated by a complex web of factors which perpetuate this cycle of alienation for Aboriginal students, often linked to poor levels of literacy. Within such a construction of educational disadvantage, the truancy/social exclusion nexus could be represented as the consequence of failing to address the pedagogical needs of beginning Aboriginal learners, regardless of their age.

> Going into schools just cemented the awareness for me. I don't know how many kids have got to Year 8 still reading at Year 3 to 5 level, if they're lucky. They can't read.

This conclusion was reached by many participants in the non-attendance study, as students, parents, teachers and particularly by Juvenile Justice personnel faced with forcing re-integration of adolescent offenders into a school system unable to adjust to the pedagogical needs of students who are illiterate but have no intellectual disability. Pockets of good practice were reported, with flexible, age-appropriate reading materials for beginning (adolescent and adult) readers, but the reports were rare, and usually associated with alternative educational programs often inaccessible for Aboriginal students. Selection policies, transport expectations, motivation for students already marginalised through chronic truancy, suspension, interaction with the justice system and substance abuse all exacerbate issues of continued education.

Legislative ownership of the literacy/truancy problem can provide an opportunity for systemic denial of any social conscience. Lisa Delpit (1995) suggests we must be cautious in our framing of failure, as it reflects the ideological basis of the framer as much as the framed.

> Teacher education usually focuses on research that links failure and socioeconomic status, failure and cultural difference, and failure and single-parent households. It is hard to believe that these children can possibly be successful after their teachers have been so thoroughly exposed to so much negative indoctrination. When teachers receive that kind of education, there is a tendency to assume deficits in students rather than to locate and teach to strengths. To counter this tendency, educators must have knowledge of children's lives outside of school so as to recognise their strengths (Delpit, 1995, p.172).

Current assessment frameworks developed within a cultural discourse of assumed deficit and in an inappropriate timeframe often cloud the potential achievement of many Aboriginal students.[7] The question is how to utilise this knowledge to lessen the impact of perceived failure in early schooling on entrenched non-attendance patterns for compulsory aged Aboriginal students. There are clear indications of chronic non-attendance patterns for young Aboriginal students, immediately placing them at risk of in terms of literacy.

Within any structured learning environment, there is the potential for the misunderstanding of the cultural basis of an Aboriginal student's language use, verbal cues, body language and response to instruction (whether educational or behavioural) to affect both their continued engagement in an educational program. The potential for such cultural miscuing to affect a student's rejection by the school (through enactment of behaviour management policies) is highlighted by Beresford & Omaji (1996):

> For a great many urban Aborigines, 'correct English' is not their first language. In homes, 'Aboriginal English', that is a mixture of both language forms, is the preferred method of communication. For Aboriginal youth brought down from country and remote regions of the State, language problems are likely to be even more pronounced. Even the appointment of interpreters may not resolve the problems for many Aboriginal youth. The significance of 'guilt' is outside the experience and comprehension of some Aboriginal youth and language, itself, is intimately bound up with the culture of the people who use it (1996, p.110).

Without addressing the cultural framing of policy and pedagogical approaches to literacy, it is difficult to conceive any intervention in the seemingly inevitable path to educational and social alienation. There appears to be an inevitable interaction between literacy problems, long-term unemployment and perpetuation of welfare dependency. A contextual reading of current literacy policy and pedagogy seems essential if cultural cycles of marginalisation are to be broken.

The teacher factor

Experience of teachers

The flexibility of attitude towards coping with students whose attendance was irregular, who could not meet the norms of behaviour and academic achievement within the classroom and the confidence to implement such flexibility was more evident in teachers with a wide range of teaching experience. Data from the non-attendance study indicated this flexibility and recognition of the diverse needs of students was more likely to be part of the pedagogy practiced by teachers with a strong sense of cultural and social nature of a classroom. Flexibility did not necessarily relate to the length of teaching experience, as established beliefs could manifest as rigid notions of equity of provision.

For example, an Aboriginal mother interviewed in the non-attendance study told of her desperate attempts to re-integrate her 14 year-old son into the school system. A second son, totally alienated from educational opportunities, had recently committed suicide. The mother had gone to great deal of trouble to change her welfare accommodation cross-district in order to access a reportedly more 'inclusive' school for her illiterate son, who had also been alienated from school for several years. Despite her attempts to overcome the 'system', her son once again rejected school. He was embarrassed at his inability to cope with classroom expectations, especially the constant testing of his literacy levels. Every change of school required him to undergo the same battery of diagnostic literacy tests. His attempts to re-integrate into the school system rarely survived the day of testing. It does not seem unreasonable to consider referral of the diagnostic information between institutions, to prevent the student's self-perpetuating loss of identity as a learner.

One feature of rural schools in Western Australia is that they tend to be staffed by newly graduated teachers, or teachers in their first years of teaching experience. While these teachers bring with them an abundance of energy and enthusiasm, together with training in the most recent developments in pedagogy, they have not yet developed the depth of practical knowledge to support them in very complex teaching situations.

A high proportion of the teachers in the literacy study were in their first or second year of service and only two of the teachers had more than five years teaching experience. For these teachers, their limited experience meant that they had few resources for teaching pre-literate children, and the pressures they faced seemed to make them less creative in their pedagogical approach. One clear feature of inexperience was uncertainty about the curriculum: "I really didn't have much of an idea of what to cover, what I'm supposed to cover...I just worry that I'm not covering the right things." (Pre-primary teacher).

The diversity of children's levels of achievement also presented problems for less experienced teachers. They tended to teach classes as whole groups rather than in smaller, ability groups or by using Individual Education Plans. This meant that the children at either end of the spectrum were less well catered for, and this in turn often

resulted in behaviour problems. In some classes there was a very broad range of proficiency: "I've got one girl who's nearly three years ahead. She's in year two, so she's reading at year five level, and I've got a couple of kids who aren't even at pre-primary [level] yet" (Year 2/3 teacher).

None of the teachers in the literacy study had completed compulsory units in Aboriginal education as part of their pre-service training, and only one teacher had completed elective units. Only two of the teachers had actively sought a position in a school with significant numbers of Aboriginal children. Some teachers appeared to be unprepared for life in a relatively isolated rural community and reacted in negative ways:

> I thought I'd been sent to Hell when I first came here. I did everything I could to get away again - even thought about resigning. There are no Aboriginal people where my parents live and where I taught in my first year; I wasn't prepared for what I found here. I did stupid things like going round constantly checking all the doors and windows, because I was living in a house on my own. My Dad showed me how to take the leads off the car when I left it at night. I don't do that now. I'm still cautious, but I don't go to those lengths. My parents still worry about me though, so I don't tell them about what goes on here. They'll get a shock when they come up here for the Show (Year 1/2 teacher).

All the teachers appeared to be aware that there were cultural issues connected with teaching Aboriginal children and living in a community with Aboriginal people. However, most of the teachers appeared to have a negative perception of these issues and felt ill equipped to deal with them. In many cases, this was compounded by new teachers' lack of experience in schools generally: "some situations with behaviour, well I've never come across some of the things that happen, I suppose I've always had cushy little schools in Claremont where I've done prac" (Graduate teacher).

Not all the teachers who were in their first year of service had selected teaching as a career straight from school. A number of teachers had gone through university as mature-aged students and had taken up appointments at the schools because their husbands were employed with local mining companies. While most of the young teachers had been posted to the schools through a kind of "drafting" process employed by the Education Department to place new graduates, the teachers who had followed their husbands had secured their positions by approaching the school for relief work and being offered temporary positions as they became available. Graduate teachers appeared to feel that they had little or no choice in the location of their employment; the feeling was that they should take up whatever position was offered rather than be without a job.

Transience of teachers and administrators

The transience of teachers and administration teams was a significant issue in rural schools, with the consequence that there was often little coherence in any curriculum offered to students in most remote and many rural schools. Some teachers had taken positions in their schools because it was all that was available at the time, and this meant that they were actively seeking employment elsewhere, either in the independent system or in the Government system through merit selection.

The effect of this transience was forcibly demonstrated in school 1, where the year one children had a succession of three different teachers in one year. The first teacher stayed for two terms. She was then replaced by another teacher, who embarked on a somewhat different program of teaching. By the fourth term, this teacher had also left the school and was replaced by a teacher who had been working in a support capacity with the older children and had yet a different approach to teaching young children. As a result of this series of events, the year one children did not have enough time to build a solid and effective relationship with any one teacher; they were subjected to a number of different approaches to the teaching of literacy, and there was little continuity in the literacy program.

This transience was not restricted to classroom teachers. The administration team (principal and two deputy principals) at the same school was affected in a similar way, when, due to promotions, the administration team changed three times during the year. Only one member of the administration team remained in a position for the full school year. By the middle of term four, the team for 1999 had not been confirmed, which again made planning for the following year difficult. Table 5 below documents the changes in staffing at school 1 during the course of almost two years.

Table 5.
Teacher & Administrator Changes, 1998 & 1999, School 1.

1998	Term 2	Year 1 teacher leaves to take up another position New Year 1 teacher appointed Principal moves back to Perth Deputy 2 becomes Acting Principal
	Term 3	Year 1 teacher leaves to take up administrative position Support teacher appointed as Year 1 teacher Acting Principal moves back to Perth New Acting Principal appointed from neighbouring school Deputy 2 position appointed
	Term 4	Most teachers terminate their contracts, including all teachers from P-3. Approximately 4 teachers elect to remain for 1999 Acting Deputy 2 contract terminated Acting Principal reappointed as Principal for 1999 Acting Deputy 1 reappointed as Deputy for 1999
1999	Term 1	Deputy 2 appointed 2 Teachers appointed to Pre-primary (job-sharing) 1998 Year 5 teacher takes over Year 2 class 1998 Year 4 teacher takes over Year 1 class
	Term 2	Pre-primary teacher 1 takes maternity leave. Pre-primary teacher 2 continues full-time Deputy 2 leaves to take up a position in another district
	Term 3	Acting Deputy 2 appointed from existing staff. Pre-primary teacher 2 leaves to return to Perth Relief teacher appointed for 4 weeks in Pre-primary
	Term 4	New graduate teacher appointed for Pre-primary

Relief teachers

A common problem for schools in rural areas was that they experienced considerable difficulties when staff members were absent due to sickness or for professional development. When teachers were sick, the children from their classes were split up and allocated to various other classrooms, where they were simply kept occupied. Teachers in host classes complained that having to accommodate children from other classes resulted in more behaviour problems and a disruption to their teaching program. As a consequence, neither group of children received effective teaching in these situations.

Reframing the Pedagogy

Recognition of the need for flexibility and cultural awareness in addressing the particular educational needs of Aboriginal students was shown in both studies to be dependent on school community beliefs surrounding equity in both the penalties for non-attendance and the pedagogical needs of beginning readers. Angus (1998, p.113) suggests a "construction of equity which equates it with similitude of provision" is at the core of the problem. A construction of difference reflecting cultural constructions of equity can be read through Ruby's (1999) concern surrounding the impact of the limiting nature of human tolerance, complementing the concern surrounding the impact of a public framing of youth as different:

> Our capacity to accept and celebrate difference is not innate. Our instinct is to seek similarity and to fear difference. This fear increases as uncertainty increases, particularly when food, work, and wealth are threatened. Fear then transforms into violence and parades as ethnic and religious intolerance. These take over and become a self-sustaining culture of violence, hatred and crime. (Ruby, 1999, p.4)

This section of the paper proposes pragmatic beginnings to a more inclusive and culturally sensitive framing of policy and pedagogy associated with both non-attendance and literacy. These pragmatic beginnings are discussed in terms of the underlying beliefs needed to activate pedagogical shifts of this magnitude, and the potential impact on literacy outcomes of early implementation of these identified strategies.

Reframing attendance

The outcome of framing public policy associated with students whose non-attendance patterns are either regulated by themselves or by the school system is a form of social exclusion. Rigid notions of school, community protection and manageable behaviour create a vortex in which miscreants become increasingly isolated from both the school environment and the social environment and recidivists are covertly excluded from re-integration into educational opportunities. Many schools participating in the non-attendance study still read absenteeism of indigenous students as truancy, often within dogmatic determination to apply 'punitive equity' within the bounds of teacher (and school) authority? How can the continued cultural ignorance in schools be accepted, despite the opportunities provided in the last decade for members of the broadly defined 'community' to develop some semblance cultural awareness?

The study identified recurring themes of (mis)interpretation of cultural differences in 'home' situations still dominating institutional definitions of 'dysfunctional' families. The culture of poverty and unemployment needs to be recognised not only as a correlate of potential school alienation and subsequent truancy, but as an indicator of the critical need to take a more enlightened and flexible view of educational opportunities. The technical resources are in most schools, the need is well documented, and outcome measures can now provide a transportable educational profile for a student. It seems the missing ingredient for triggering change is a question of priority.

Access to portable, culturally appropriate curricula (especially associated with literacy) for semi-literate adolescents is currently limited in Western Australia. Intelligent, mature young people who happen to have a major literacy problem consider the expectation for them to use School Psychology Education Resource (SPER) reading units an insult. A key issue identified in interview data from the non-attendance study was the lack of appropriate literacy resources for adolescant Aboriginal students (particularly boys) with a reading age of approximately eight or nine years. A comprehensive literacy program has been tailored to the educational needs of the young people in detention centres. As this literacy program has been developed under the auspices of the Juvenile Justice system, it is not available to non-offenders. The need to negotiate some form of access to such a valuable resource would be of benefit to the broader social and educational community.

It seems paradoxical that 'truants' attempting to return to any for of regular engagement with the education system are generally unable to access resources developed by the School of Isolated and Distance Education. The boundaries of ownership (and associated resources) need to be re-negotiated to include students who have become educationally 'isolated' through clashing notions of appropriate behavior, dysfunctional home situations, and who simply can't cope with the curricula requirements in a system stratified within a framework promoting chronological progression. Educators need to move past the assumption that the problem lies with the 'different' student and question the system itself. Such reflection on practice could instigate flexible consideration of integrating 'different' student educational needs and attendance patterns into 'different' school structures.

A reframing of notions of attendance could involve:

- More flexible notions of 'compulsory' education, including 'compulsory' age boundaries, reflecting local cultural contexts.
- Appropriate cultural membership of community panels associated with mediating aspects of student attendance and behaviour, at both school and district level.
- Flexibility of access and accountability for curricula (particularly in terms of literacy) associated with recidivist Aboriginal truants.
- Whole school focus on the development of an awareness of current cultural and social constraints and conditions which impinge on Aboriginal students' ability to cope with rigid notions of appropriate attendance and behaviour.
- Resource priority for alternative educational settings and alternative pedagogies to accommodate the particular cultural needs of alienated students.
- Recognition of the right for students who have been suspended from their regular schooling to a continued form of education during the time of the suspension.
- Efficient and responsible tracking mechanisms to dispell misconceptions surrounding attendance patterns of transient students.

Reframing literacy

A number of terms are used to describe models of education which are considered to be appropriate for Aboriginal children, including "Both Ways education" (Daniels & Daniels, 1991; Groome, 1994; Heitmeyer, Nilan & O'Brien, 1996; Lanhupuy, 1987; McTaggart, 1988; Yunupingu, 1991), "Two Way Learning" or "Two-way Schooling" (Harris, 1988; 1990; McConvell, 1982; Malcolm, 1995), "Two-way cultural exchange" (McConvell, 1991), "Right Way schooling" (Vallance & Vallance, 1988), and "Bidialectal education" (Malcolm, 1995). These models are based on notions of a culturally different world view (Harris, 1990) and culturally different ways of socialisation (Malin, 1989; 1990; West, 1994).

Prior to the construction of these various models of education, Fanshawe (1984) suggested that there were a number of teacher characteristics that should be demonstrated by an effective teacher of Aboriginal students. The first of these characteristics is that the teacher should be demanding in terms of his or her students' academic achievements. Secondly, an effective teacher of Aboriginal students should be warm and supportive, providing guidance and encouragement, and sympathetic to the students' home culture. A third characteristic identified by Fanshawe (1984) was that teachers should be stimulating, providing learning experiences for their students that were purposeful and relevant to students' needs. Finally, teachers should be responsible and organised, displaying a high degree of professional competence.

The issue of culturally appropriate teaching is not one that is peculiar to Australia. American educator Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) has identified a number of features of good pedagogical practice which have been connected with the successful teaching of African American students, another cultural group who typically perform at lower academic levels (Frisby, 1993a; Frisby, 1993b; The College Board, cited in Ladson-Billings, 1995, p.159). Ladson Billings (1995) argues that teaching strategies are simply the surface features of a teacher's classroom practice; that it is the "philosophical and ideological underpinnings of their practice" (p. 162) which identify competency in teaching. She further claims that the ideology that underpins culturally relevant pedagogy would provide good teaching for any student, but particularly those students from marginalised groups. These features include the belief that all of the students can succeed; respectful relationships between teacher and students; the creation of the classroom as a collaborative community of learners; teachers critiquing and reflecting on their own practice and materials, and scaffolding students for success.

Although Fanshawe's (1984) argument is not articulated as clearly as that of Ladson-Billings (1995), there is a striking similarity between Fanshawe's teacher characteristics and Ladson-Billings' features of culturally relevant pedagogy. A synthesis of the ideas represented in these two articles leads to the distillation of five principles for the successful education of minority group children.

- Believe that every child can succeed
- Build respectful relationships
- Create a community of learners
- Become a critical, reflective practitioner
- Scaffold for success

The Impact of Early Intervention Measures

The need for early intervention to counter established patterns of non-attendance was outlined by most of the agencies participating in the non-attendance study. Issues impinging on introduction of the preventative measures centred around availability of resources to meet the needs of a marginalised group, even when advocates for the group could present a compelling case for the long-term benefits of early intervention. Rare cases of best practice were found, demonstrating the importance of a whole school community focus on cultural and diverse needs of their client group. In such cases, attitudes towards student attendance were focused on a positive and encouraging aspects of three days attendance, rather than taking the punitive view of two days deliberate non-attendance. For adolescent Aboriginal students faced with loss of pride through their inability to cope with literacy expectations within a standard classroom, this positive shift in the reading of 'transience' and 'truancy' can activate the self confidence and motivation to at least attempt to attend school more often.

For one school in the literacy study, there is a very strong focus on early intervention. This intervention takes a number of forms, not all of which are linked directly to improving literacy outcomes. The school takes a holistic approach. Intervention measures include a school bus, showers for children who want them, a nutrition program which provides breakfast and lunch, access to health provision and inter-agency support, a strong emphasis on oral language in the pre-primary program and in year two and above, literacy intervention based on Reading Recovery procedures.

> ...we spoke to teachers, looked at school records, spoke to parents and to children. What we found was essentially three things: [Firstly], most of the children who were seen to be at risk had not participated in 4-year-old or 5-year-old programs. [Secondly], their attendance was less than forty per cent. [Thirdly], there were serious concerns in relation to their general health status. Having narrowed down what we saw were the general reasons behind these children failing to thrive in the education system meant that we could tailor a program to target these key areas....If you're hungry, we can do something about that. If your ears are blocked, or got holes in them, we can do something about that...but what we will do the most is empower you to make decisions about your own life. And they're all things that generally don't cost much money. (Welfare Officer).

Encouraging attendance

Both studies found evidence of pragmatic school community action taken to ensure Aboriginal students have daily access to school by the community investment in a bus dedicated to collecting each child from their home and transporting them home at the end of the school day. Aboriginal parents welcomed the intervention strategy. One primary school in the non-attendance study found their Aboriginal 'truancy' rate decreased from 40 per cent to 15 per cent within a three month period after buying the dedicated bus. Six

months later, the school community is considering buying a larger bus, as the number of Aboriginal children wanting to attend school regularly has doubled.

Mineside Primary School, a participant in the literacy study, employs a number of strategies to encourage regular attendance at school. The over-riding philosophy was that school should be made "an appealing place where the children would feel welcomed and unthreatened". This philosophy has provided the driving force for a number of programs which are run from the school, including a breakfast and lunch program, showers for those who want them, and access to health workers and facilities. Mineside Primary School bus picks children up from outside their home wherever they live, and drops them off at any pre-arranged location in the afternoon. One of the teachers described the impact that the introduction of the school bus had on attendance: "Although most of the adults were shy and rarely showed themselves at the school they were always happy for us to pick the kids up each day and for the first time the parents started to want their children to go to school." These initiatives appear to be having a positive effect:

> As a result of the bus acquisition, children from all over the town started to come to the school. Knowledge of the program became so widespread that we started to get children coming to the school who were just visiting but still wanted to attend school while they were away from their own community (Pre-primary teacher).

Addressing health issues

The school also runs a nutrition program, which makes available breakfast and lunch for any child attending the school. The focus of the nutrition program is on giving the children the skills to be able to care for themselves. Children are shown how to get their own breakfast & clear away afterwards. Collins (1999, p.149) reports on the concerns that schools with breakfast and lunch programs have "about usurping the role of parents and engendering increased levels of dependency." At Mineside, however, the breakfast program is seen to be a temporary measure. Teachers report that as a general rule, after a child has been having breakfast at the school for some time, their participation in the breakfast program tends to taper off. It seems that children are asking their parents to buy breakfast cereal and start having breakfast at home. Given the skills, the children gradually take over responsibility themselves.

In a similar intervention mode, one of the high schools participating in the non-attendance program had instigated a breakfast program for students who did not normally have access to a morning meal. Adolescent students alienated from their homes, as well as students whose home situation did not necessarily provide regular nutrition, began coming to school for the breakfast program and remaining at school for a substantial part of the school day. Again, a positive school attitude towards 'flexible' attendance provided the catalyst for many students to attempt to re-enter regular schooling.

As part of the health program, a community nurse comes in every day to conduct audiology assessments, check children's ear health, and supply medication as necessary. As a result of this, ear infections are picked up early and treated on site. Most of the children who have been at the school since the induction of the program in their pre-primary or kindergarten grades have healthy ears.

Literacy-related intervention

The kindergarten (4-year-old) and pre-primary (5-year-old) programs at Mineside are generally well attended because the school bus collects children and returns them home. A number of children who attend the early years programs at Mineside have access to programs nearer their homes, but their parents choose to send them to Mineside because the bus makes attendance easy and the programs are seen as being more appropriate to the children's needs. The kindergarten and pre-primary programs place heavy emphasis on developing children's oral language, exposing children to the features of print, and games and activities which informally introduce children to the kinds of behaviours they will need in order to successfully "do school". If a child is considered not to be ready for the more formal learning that takes place in year one, it is suggested that they repeat the pre-primary year. As a result of this policy, the children in the year one/two class appear to be able to tune in to learning about literacy and print without the impediment of disruptive behaviour from other students.

As children move into year one and begin more formal literacy instruction, their development in this area is monitored closely. Teachers recognise that children may have limited exposure to literate-like behaviours outside school and accept that these concepts may take time to develop. Nevertheless, the expectation is that they will develop, given adequate time and effective teaching.

Close monitoring of children's early literacy development is continued and during the second year of formal schooling (year two), children may be selected for one-on-one intensive tutoring, using Reading Recovery (Clay, 1993b) procedures. This intensive tutoring allows teachers to diagnose and remediate any gaps that may exist in children's literacy knowledge because of their erratic attendance. Children who have less erratic attendance, or less transience, may develop this knowledge without intervention, or may benefit from intervention at a later stage. The result of this close monitoring and intervention is that many of the year three children in the school, particularly those who had been connected with the school in the pre-primary program, met the National Literacy Benchmarks in 1999.

Status of teachers

The intervention measures that have been put in place at Mineside Primary School have received considerable support from the school community. Parents of primary-aged Aboriginal children choose to send their children to Mineside because the school is seen to get results. Because the teachers at the school are perceived by the parents to be working in the interests of the children, parents are more willing to come to the school and participate in their children's education. Respectful relationships are being forged between teachers and administrators, parents, students and the wider community. As a result of this two-way cultural exchange, teachers at the school feel their work is valued by the community, and the consequential increase in teacher esteem has led to less teacher transience and more continuity in the programs offered to the children. Because the programs have the support of the wider community, and are seen to be working well, it is more difficult for an incoming administrator to demand changes.

The approach at Mineside is one of accommodation and intervention without reduced expectations. Being "culturally aware" means that teachers and other school personnel have an understanding of the antecedents to certain kinds of behaviour, different kinds of literacy knowledge, or phenomena such as non-attendance and poor health, and deal with the situation without passing judgement or compromising the desired outcomes. This approach is demonstrated by a comment made by the year one/two teacher:

> There may be times when children come to school and they're tired; they didn't get much sleep last night because of whatever was going on at home. Well, I can't do anything about whatever's going on at home, but I can find them a spot to lie down and have a sleep, and then maybe after that they'll be able to concentrate better.

Given these intervention measures and extended time-frames, the expectation is that the students from Minside will succeed in achieving the desired educational outcomes by the time they leave primary school. The hope is that this in turn will set them up for increased success in their secondary education and subsequently, increased life-choices once they leave the education system.

Conclusions

It is naïve to think entrenched attitudes, beliefs and fears can be changed merely by the identification of the means by which perceptions fundamental to cultural notions of difference and youth are perpetuated. Some aspects of these beliefs are so firmly entrenched in the legal, historical, political and economic construction of the Aboriginal child that any proposed change will be slow and confronting. Changing fundamental notions of poverty, unemployment, or substance abuse within tenets of nostalgic community constructions of youth, school and Aboriginal are not without political and legal overtones. As Bruner (1996) points out:

> Ways of doing are not easily changed when they become institutionalized not only in law but also in the habits of those who have come all too unconsciously to depend upon the more heavily sedemented procedures of the law (Bruner, 1996, p.158).

However, there are always pragmatic beginnings. It is not unreasonable to assume the role of the school in developing cultural awareness and tolerance of difference, nor is it unreasonable to assume the role of the teacher can be mediated to heighten cultural awareness and incorporate images reflecting tolerance of difference. Reframing the role of the teacher and the school community to address students' specific needs in terms of culture, academic achievement and attendance can provide a chance of reducing the potential alienation of culturally 'different' students and concomitantly improving literacy outcomes for a marginalised group of students.

The non-attendance study illustrated the alienating impact of rigid policies related to school attendance and behaviour, perpetuating the cycle of unemployment and potential welfare dependency for those students whose poor literacy skills both triggered

the non-attendance and were impacted upon by the irregular school attendance. The literacy study provided evidence that these alienation factors could be substantially reduced within a school environment which was perceived by the students to be addressing their needs. In both studies, the culturally inclusive nature of notions of attendance and pedagogical approaches in addressing literacy outcomes were seen to have a positive effect on both literacy standards and regular school attendance.

Three factors underpinning the culturally sensitive pedagogy were identified within both studies as fundamental to reducing Aboriginal student alienation and improving literacy outcomes for Aboriginal children. The professional competence of the teacher and the administrative staff within the school community, the cultural knowledge of these parties and their attitudes and beliefs towards a child's potential to succeed were identified as critical elements in an Aboriginal child's achievement and participation in a school community. The inter-relationship between these factors are outlined below in Figure 2.

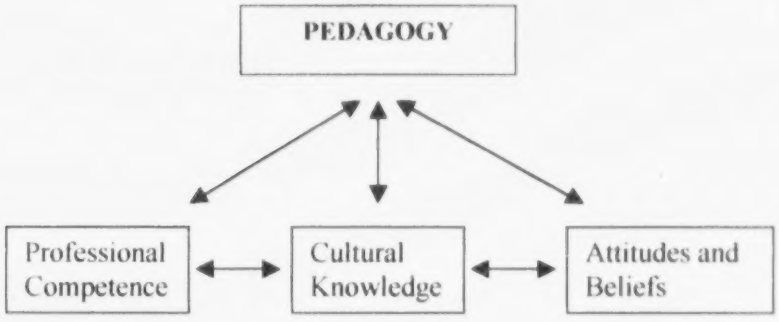

Figure 2. Factors underpinning the framing of pedagogy related to teaching Aboriginal students.

The *professional competence* of a teacher or an administrator allows the flexibility of delivery and policy implementation which will maximise the opportunity for meeting the individual needs of the child. This competence allows effective literacy teaching directed at individual student needs. Such a shift in addressing the child's needs provides a purposeful and motivating learning environment which in turn promotes a child's interest in regular school attendance.

The *cultural knowledge* of the members of the school community provide a learning environment in which there is an professional understanding of students' actions and reactions and accommodate these patterns of behaviour and learning without reducing expectations of educational achievement. Such a heightened cultural awareness will allow the school community to re-frame rigid notions of transience, behaviour

management, health issues and other social, cultural and family factors impacting on the potential achievement of Aboriginal children.

For any successful reframing of pedagogy and literacy in a community context are the powerful powerful *attitudes and beliefs* underpinning professional competence and cultural knowledge. Unless a teacher and a school community has a strong belief in the potential for any child to succeed in learning to read and has a positive attitude to acknowledging Aboriginal culture, there will always be the potential for the perpetuation of misconceptions related to Aboriginal students' attendance, behaviour and capacity to learn. As pointed out in 'Bringing them Home' report (1997, p.546), there is the potential to read the transient nature of student attendance to maintain familial and cultural relationships as 'instability' and to read differences in the level of freedom and responsibility accorded to indigenous children as 'lack of supervision'. There is the potential for cultural biases to become incorporated in assessments and reports used to justify less inclusive and flexible pedagogy or policy reactions to non-attendance and behaviour expectations, with long term impact on the alienation and literacy levels of Aboriginal children. A belief in the potential of every child, however, will provide the necessary foundation for reframing both attendance and literacy in a community context as measures for Aboriginal alienation.

The global context within which constructions of alienation and literacy factors associated with poverty, diversity, family structures and unemployment were presented early in this paper provided the focus for an illustration of alternative pedagogical needs related to literacy for Aboriginal students. The question posed was how to utilise this knowledge to lessen the impact of perceived 'failure' in early schooling and entrenched non-attendance patterns for these students. The two studies used to illustrate the potential impact of reframing related pedagogy were particular to Aboriginal students in Western Australia. However, the factors identified as underpinning the effective reframing of such pedagogy and the potential for such reframing to improve literacy outcomes is seen to have applications for addressing literacy and attendance factors for other marginalised groups. The potential for improving literacy levels within a school community sensitive to cultural and pedagogical diversity has been shown within these two studies to offer the parallel potential to encourage a more lateral view of non-attendance patterns and reduce student alienation.

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[1] Aboriginal Education Operational Plan 1997-1999. EDWA

[2] Ibid, p.225

[3] The Institute of Medicine (1997) publication 'Dispelling myths about addiction' discusses the major health problem created through addiction across a diverse age group, including school children

[4] Zubrick et al. (1997), Beresford & Omaji (1996, 1998), Nicholls (1998)

[5] Beresford & Omaji (1996, 1998) and the 'Bringing them home' report (1997)

[6] Ibid

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